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ABSTRACT

In 2001, the New Zealand Ministry of Education awarded a contract to a consortium of three colleges of education to provide a training program that would lead to a new national literacy qualification for a newly developed specialist literacy teaching position--Resource Teacher: Literacy. Resource Teachers of Literacy are skilled and experienced classroom teachers. They are required to work with teachers and children to provide quality learning opportunities for children in years one to eight who are making low progress in literacy. This includes advice and guidance to teachers and schools; one on one tutoring; and consultation and maintenance of effective relationships with schools, families, referral agencies, and the wider community. The training program was designed to spread over two years as part time study. The program creates specific challenges to both learners and providers. Key features of the program, structure and delivery, outcomes of the program, meeting the needs and expanding the program, and ongoing professional development are discussed. (Contains 17 references.) (PM)

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Meeting the Challenges of Literacy Difficulties
Developing a Qualification for Specialist Literacy Teachers

Libby Limbrick, Faye Parkhill and John Smith

Paper presented at the International Federation for the Teaching of English, Melbourne, July 4th - 8th, 2003

In 2001, the Ministry of Education awarded a contract to a consortium of three colleges of education (Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin) to provide a training programme that would lead to a new national literacy qualification for a newly developed specialist literacy teaching positions, Resource Teacher: Literacy. The programme has been developed by three teacher educators Dr. Libby Limbrick, Ms Faye Parkhill and Dr. John Smith in three institutions – Auckland College of Education, Christchurch College of Education and Dunedin College of Education. The three developers are based in their colleges, geographically separated, representing the largest city in New Zealand (Auckland), the largest city in the South Island (Christchurch) and a small provincial city near the bottom of the South Island (Dunedin). The course content was developed collaboratively and is relevant to the varying conditions in which Resource Teachers : Literacy (RT:Lits) work. These range from multicultural urban areas to isolated country schools. As RT:Lits are a mobile group, the course equips them to work in a range of settings and with a coherent philosophy regardless of the geographical context.

Background to the development

In 1998, the New Zealand government in power and the Ministry of Education responded to media concerns about an apparent decline in literacy standards and, specifically, a reported disparity in achievement in literacy between high and low achievers (Elley 1992; Flockton & Crooks,1997;1996; MOE, 1997). Since the 1970s, when the international comparison in reading achievement identified New Zealand as having the highest literacy levels amongst the participating countries, there have been marked demographic changes in the New Zealand population. It appeared that current approaches to literacy education were not meeting the literacy needs of the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of the population.

Two professional groups were established to confront the issues and suggest directions for the future. One a Literacy Taskforce, (MOE, 1999) was comprised of teachers, principals, literacy specialists, teacher educators and community literacy representatives and members of the Ministry of Education. The second was a Literacy Experts Group , academics who represented differing theoretical and pedagogical perspectives in the field of literacy education. This 'Experts group' was charged with reporting on national and international research in literacy education and about current understandings of the nature of literacy and literacy education (MOE, 1999). Their deliberations were to advise the Literacy Taskforce. The Report from the Literacy Taskforce (MOE,1999) resulted in a number of recommendations which have since been actioned through a National Literacy Initiative.

Notable amongst the recommendations were changes to the National Education Guidelines and National Achievement Guidelines to require a greater focus on literacy and numeracy in the first four years of compulsory schooling.

The National Literacy (and Numeracy) Initiative was developed with a threefold focus which encompassed a strong message arising out of the Literacy Taskforce that the most important influence in literacy education is the quality of the interactions between the teacher and the student . The three strands were

- Clarifying expectations
- Lifting professional capability
- Developing community capability

The first of these interrelated strands has since been addressed through the development of nationally available assessment tasks that provide not only comparative data but also information that can improve teaching and learning. These include exemplars for writing (MOE, 2003) and assessment tools for teaching and learning (MOE, 2002).

The second strand has established school wide review and refinement of literacy education; specific initiatives to meet the needs of Maori and Pasifika learners and students from language backgrounds other than English; new resources to support and enhance teacher knowledge and contestable funding for programmes in low deciles School and the establishment of a new position: Resource Teachers:Literacy.

It is this second component of the National Literacy Initiative that is being reported on in this paper. Whereas up until this time there had been specialist teachers to work with students struggling in literacy beyond the support afforded by the Reading Recovery programme, their role had been limited. Throughout New Zealand there were only 68 Resource Teacher of Reading positions. However there was no specific training for these critical positions. Furthermore, the focus was predominately on reading, and did not encompass the wider views of literacy acknowledged today.

In 2001, these positions were replaced by approximately 100 Resource Teachers: Literacy positions, and a tender process implemented to establish an Graduate and Postgraduate diploma that would constitute an appropriate professional development programme.

Challenges for Learners

Resource Teachers of Literacy are skilled and experienced classroom teachers. As specialists in literacy education, they are required to work with teachers and children to provide quality learning opportunities for children in years one to eight who are making low progress in literacy. This includes advice and guidance to teachers and schools and the provision of one to one tutoring for some children. Integral to their role is consultation and maintenance of effective relationships with schools, families, referral agencies and the wider community.

RT:Lits are based at a host school and work in an itinerant role in a designated cluster of schools. They require an in-depth knowledge of the New Zealand curriculum and an understanding of the education system. According to their Professional Standards from 2004 they will be required to hold or be studying towards a Post Graduate/ Graduate Diploma of Education (Literacy) or its equivalent.

These learners were derived from two groups. Over half (68) were former Resource Teachers of Reading (RTRs) and the other group (60) had been appointed to the more expanded role of RT:Lit in the previous year. Some of these newly appointed RT:Lits had undertaken recent study and they were appointed with the knowledge that a training programme would be in place the following year.

Those who had been RTRs were familiar with their role as a literacy specialist in the one to one tutoring situation, but a significant number were apprehensive about a wider role in the field of literacy difficulties. Many felt daunted by the prospect of academic study and some, reacting to the compulsory nature of the training, were quite resistant at the start, greeting the providers of the training with comments such as

" *I don't want to be here... it's because I had to take these courses to keep my job*".

However such comments were balanced by those who pointed out energetically to their colleagues that other teachers had to pay more than $3000, and had no time allocated for study from their jobs, declaiming *"Aren't we lucky to have such a wonderful opportunity!"* said one enthusiastic teacher on the first day of the first block course.

' I just feel that today is the beginning of a VERY BIG ADVENTURE!"

The range of qualifications over the entire cohort extended from Diploma of Teaching (or Trained Teachers Certificate) dating back three or more decades, to Masters degrees gained in the last year. The level of study depended on their entry criteria with many at the graduate diploma level. Those holding Bachelors degrees or equivalent, or higher, were eligible to study at postgraduate level although a few in this category elected to work at the lower graduate level.

The training programme was designed to spread over two years as part-time study. As literacy specialists in a new position, there was a need to clarify their role and many experienced a high demand on their time, professional knowledge and energy in their cluster schools. The Ministry of Education suggested that at least half a day per week needed to be allotted to their study and many were granted a whole day by their host school.

The flexible delivery of course material proved an additional challenge. For many, it necessitated the development of computer skills well beyond their current level of competency. Attendance at three day block courses, when they occurred in the school holidays, was met with resistance by some and the accessing of material and posting contributions to Webct took some persuasion and time to develop confidence.

Comments appended to evaluations of the introductory block course indicate the anxiety and sense of challenge many of the RT:Lits experienced

" I found the whole thing to be very overwhelming at first."
" Was rather daunting but very relevant and valuable for those who had been away from study for some time."

Challenges for Providers

In more recent years, tertiary providers, in a market driven system imposed by central government, have experienced a climate of competition rather than cooperation. The awarding of this contract necessitated close collegial relationships across three institutions including the sharing of knowledge and resources.

The challenges for the institutions extended beyond the professional relationships of the three directors in the project. The integration of institutional procedures including accreditation processes involved other general and academic staff as well as the three principals of the colleges in a formal Memorandum of Understanding. It was essential that one college was responsible for the administration of the qualification including the financial aspects of the contract. The appointment of Dr Libby Limbrick as project director in a fulltime capacity, was also crucial to the success of the project.

The key component was to provide a high quality course with national coverage and consistency. This challenge was compounded by the range of entry points of the course participants and the non-voluntary nature of their involvement in the study. The tentativeness of the learners and, in a few cases reluctance, and extreme stress, demanded very effective interpersonal skills and consistency in the responses to uncertainties and queries.

The existence of current and relevant literacy courses in the three colleges at the required levels, facilitated the development of the course content and material in relation to already approved course outlines. However, in a comparatively short timeframe, processes needed to be established to maintain regular contact with each other and the specialist teachers who were the clients. The use of electronic media was crucial for this project to succeed in the time required. Indeed as one of the course directors commented

"we simply could not have developed a four module graduate and postgraduate level course, including the writing of detailed study guides in such a short time ten to fifteen years ago."

Given that many of the clients were unused to, and even apprehensive about this form of communication, the initial contacts needed to be patient, affirming but also able to impart technical information is clear accessible ways. The first block course in four different regions revealed the tentativeness of many and varying entry points in relation to academic competency and confidence. As one participant commented

" I felt nervous, taking on the new position , the ICT involved, the return to tertiary study after so long, but I can see that you are all there for us, and we only have to ask if we don't understand."

The three directors were accustomed to the development and delivery of courses and qualifications where the students were voluntary participants. In these early contacts the challenge was to provide reassurance to a group of literacy specialists who were already experts in many aspects of their work but in many cases required up-skilling in theoretical underpinnings and in up to date research in the literacy field. The content selected needed reflect the New Zealand educational context with a distinct emphasis on meeting the challenges of children who are making low progress in literacy many of whom were representative of the increasing multicultural and multi-linguistic home backgrounds within the New Zealand population.

The co-writing of study guides for distance delivery across three institutions proved a new experience for the directors. The division of topics according to expertise and interest was necessary although this development and the editing process also involved knowledge and resources from other colleagues in the literacy area from the three colleges. The synthesis of such a range of material presented and evaluated, resulted in not only in enhancement of professional knowledge for the directors, the regional lecturers, mentors and others involved in the project, but benefits for their colleagues in the respective Colleges of Education.

Key Features of the Programme

Philosophy of Literacy teaching and learning

The course is based on a coherent philosophy developed from research evidence. Literacy is seen as a socio-cultural phenomenon, which develops from within a social context. and as such, all children have the ability to become literate (McNaughton 2002). This in turn is based on Vygotsky and his interpreters such as Rogoff, that learning is primarily a social activity. In terms of school based literacy learning our understanding is that no single approach in itself is sufficient to make all children literate. Children need phonemic awareness, word recognition strategies, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension strategies. There is no single path to the acquisition of these strategies. (Clay 1998). Nor is there any commercial kit or computer programme that will equip all children with the necessary understandings for literacy to develop. Instead sensitive teaching (Smith 1997) using appropriate materials, valid assessment techniques, together with community, family and whanau involvement must be integrated for children to become literate.

Within this programme comprehension of text is viewed as the key purpose of reading and the creation of meaning the key purpose of writing. We believe that a focus on the construction of meaning therefore should be at the centre of literacy. The making of

meaning from written language and within written language develops as the learner engages with text (Clay, 1998; MOE, 1994; MOE, 2003; Pressley 2002; Smith and Elley, 1997;Snow, Burns and Griffin 1998, ,). Children who struggle to become literate will also need explicit teaching of strategies to develop grapho-phonic understandings and word level strategies, comprehend and create messages in text and to develop metacognitive strategies essential in becoming independent literacy learners (Dymock, 1999, Nicholson, 1999, Tunmer, Chapman,Ryan and Prochnow, 1998)). The course is grounded in research findings, both from New Zealand and international research.

Systematic assessment is another essential component of literacy learning has also been a focus in this course. Research has suggested that gaps in literacy achievement are less in classrooms where teachers monitor achievement and use the data diagnostically to inform teaching (Wilkinson, 1998). We also eschew approaches to literacy based on a 'deficit' view of children.

Throughout this programme there is an emphasis on the multi-faceted nature of literacy difficulties and that no one approach will meet the needs of all learners. A basic premise of the course has been that careful assessment, analysis and interpretation by teachers whose instructional practices are well informed by theory and reflect current research, in partnership with parents and the learners' community are essential if children's literacy difficulties are to be overcome.

Structure and Delivery

Course delivery is by means of printed materials, web postings, email and an introductory block for each course. Students also meet regularly in regional cluster groups and with a mentor who is a literacy leader in the local district and who assists with specific aspects of the course such as the case study action research assignments. Technology such as internet and email plays an important part in student learning and allows for easy communication between course members regardless of their location.

There is a strong emphasis on reflective practice and assignment work is based, as much as is practical, on tasks the students encounter in the course of their work. Students are expected to justify their work by reference to appropriate research findings.

The programme consists of four compulsory papers. The first, *Research and Practice in Literacy Education,* engages the students in a review of research literature, research methodology, and requires them to undertake a small research study. The second, *The Inquiring Teacher: Enhancing Professional*, practice requires them to examine and reflect on their practice in relation to knowing the learner, knowing the approaches and resources for effective literacy practice and being a reflective practitioner. The third course, *Meeting the Challenges of Literacy Difficulties,* focuses on a range of effective research based practices for children having difficulties in literacy. It takes the strong position advocated by Marie Clay, that 'there is no child who cannot succeed in literacy learning, only children for whom we have not found the way to teach them' (source unknown). The final course, *Issues in Literacy*, examines a range of current and critical issues for specialist literacy teachers today: for example issues to do with access to

literacy, diversity, the place and purpose of interventions, both systemic and commercial and the changing nature of literacy and emergence of multi-literacies.

Students are encouraged to meet regularly with other professionals such as School Support Services and Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour, and see their work as a team effort in helping children whose literacy learning may be behind that of their peers.

Supporting the three directors in the delivery of the programme are Regional Lecturers from Auckland College of Education (Jan Keenan and Helen Villers); Wellington College of Education (John Dickie) and Dunedin College of Education (Sharon Young). Their role is to provide regular on-line support, guidance and feedback. Carol Mutch of Christchurch College of Education also contributes to the course, *Research and Practice in Literacy Education.*

Outcomes of the programme

At the time of writing, course completion for the RT:Lits is imminent. Most are relieved that study on top of working is nearly completed, but some are committed to ongoing professional development and are enrolling for Masters programmes in a range of academic institutions. The Postgraduate Diploma allows them to claim half of a masters degree and the Graduate Diploma allow them to enroll in a masters degree. For all the RT:Lits the expectation that that ongoing professional growth is both necessary and desirable for this group of literacy specialists working with low achieving children is very evident. There is a real appreciation about the role of research to inform practice and there are strong indicators through both verbal and written observations, that the group is engaging in reflective practice in their work with children, parents, teachers and other professionals. The following comments reflect these outcomes.

A spark has been ignited. I believe I will continue with this once the course has finished .A worthwhile course in giving an insight into and understanding of how research is constructed. It has enabled me to be a more critical reader of research. This course has led me to examine my own teaching more critically and to justify choices made.

A symposium presentation of their own research projects from ten of the participants at a New Zealand Reading Association conference, Wellington 2003, was a testament to their confidence to disseminate their findings in a context where the audience had a keen interest and likely expertise in literacy education.

Assignments completed, such as series of "Guidelines for Teachers working with children making low progress" for a range of areas such as Children struggling in writing, the place of phonics and phonic awareness instruction, teaching vocabulary development and comprehension strategies and peer tutoring, are providing the basis of considerable teacher professional development in schools throughout New Zealand. Action research projects and reports on small investigative research studies are influencing both classroom and individual tuition practice in many schools.

A significant outcome has been the increased confidence and ability to articulate the principles of effective practice demonstrated by all RT:Lits. Some principals have commented on an awareness that the RT:Lits are active participants in professional learning communities in the schools.

One RT:Lit, who has recently been appointed to the role, commented that before the training she was treated by her teaching colleagues as an expert in literacy but certainly didn't feel like it. She perceives that the content has provided her with a firm basis for her decision making with children and in the advice she provides for teachers. Comments from others indicate that the increase in their credibility has resulted in gains in both self-confidence and satisfaction in their work.

Another outcome has been the increased collaboration between RT:Lits as a national body of literacy experts working to enhance learning opportunities for low progress children. This has been facilitated by the use of, and confidence in technology including both email and web discussions. The formation of study groups has proved advantageous for both academic purposes and in their wider role as practitioners. The willingness to problem-solve common issues and challenges in a collaborative manner has frequently been cited as an outcome of the training.

"On-line learning is beneficial for those students working at a distance but working solo still has its disadvantages geographically. It has been great to have the opportunity for the RT:Lits throughout New Zealand to communicate on topics affecting the changing role."

Meeting the needs and expanding the programme

The contract let by the Ministry of Education for the professional development of this cohort of Resource Teachers of Literacy is completed at the end of 2003 but the challenges for literacy development are ongoing.

Consequently the qualification developed, a Graduate or Postgraduate Diploma of Literacy Education, developed to provide this very specific professional education in literacy, has been made available through the consortium of teacher education institution for a wider group of literacy educators. Teachers with New Zealand registration are eligible. The delivery mode has remained the same: an introductory block course, followed by distance study through a study guide and supported by online discussion and feedback.

For teachers newly appointed to positions of Resource Teachers of Literacy fees and costs, either for this qualification or a qualification that can be shown to be equivalent, are covered by the Ministry of Education. For other teachers, the costs are the usual costs associated with Graduate or Post graduate study. At the time of writing it is anticipated that the qualification will be offered to a new cohort commencing in 2004.

As the literacy education needs of the teachers undertaking the qualification become more diverse, the challenge for us the provides to increase the flexibility of the qualification without compromising the quality

Ongoing professional development

Another challenge for the future is to maintain the learning momentum of the current Resource Teachers of Literacy completing the qualification. The Ministry of Education has called for tenders for two hui to be held in 2004 and 2005. For many of them the encouragement to reflect on practice and the opportunities to access current research and professional literature on literacy education has whetted their appetite for further study. As noted several will be continuing on to achieve masters' level qualification.

International development in professional development

Disparity in achievement and the concern that there be success for all in literacy is a global issue. Concerns about effective practice in literacy education especially for learners struggling to get underway have internationally commonalities. We are confident that the professional development that has constituted the qualification described in this paper, informed by research and practice internationally, as well as in New Zealand, has potential to contribute to ongoing literacy education world wide.

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